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## **The Beat of Nature: Aspects of Sámi Culture in the Game *Skábma: Snowfall***

### **Introduction**

Man's being in the world is inextricably linked to its appropriation. Every human action modifies or creates real or virtual worlds, adapting them to human needs. This inevitable, eternal colonization, a kind of existential tragedy, is not entirely out of control. The degree of awareness of this property and the number of its layers which remain in the unconscious affect the quality as well as the type of colonization that is carried out. For example, at least three main trends coexist currently in relation to the globe: 1) classical colonialism, a remnant of the colonial era, manifested *inter alia* in Russian imperialism, both internal as reported by ethnic minorities and external, and in Polish policy towards sexual minorities; 2) postcolonialism, which can be found above all in the former colonial powers, such as Great Britain or Belgium, characterized by an attempt to cut off and expiate the violence of the past; however, it is not devoid of subcutaneously pervading elements of appropriation, which I will mention later; and 3) anticolonialism, characteristic of the former colonies in Africa or South America, which is emancipatory, independent and blaming.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Achille MBEMBE, "Decolonization, Disenclosure and the Common," in *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York, 2021). Quoted in: Łukasz Moll, "The Rabble and the Common" (blog), <https://therabbleandthecommon.blogspot.com/2022/09/decolonization-disenclosure-and-common.html?fbclid=IwAR0S4ncuP1bUJ6hzlrMOd0fvP1pUn-tfcwxnZ-vOT4RYu2bzurnBrS9w4YpM>.

Nevertheless, virtual worlds are ruled by different laws. As human constructs, artificial, metaphysical entities, essentially detached from the material world (although, of course, rooted in it with their carrier), they have no direct impact on people. Undeniably, they have an indirect influence on them thanks to the mighty power of the story, the narrative of cultural texts, which is capable of changing its recipient far more than any material influence, but ethical norms seem to be milder concerning them. While imperial colonialism—the invasion of a foreign state—is unequivocally assessed very negatively, the colonial ideology in cultural texts does not arouse such objections. It is enough to mention that Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel *In the Desert and in the Wilderness*, emanating with white-Catholic supremacy, is present in the obligatory canon of school readings, which was loudly but unsuccessfully protested. Similarly, whole genres of computer games are based on colonial ideology; their existence does not raise objections as long as they do not glorify explicitly the real-world colonialism. The example of this can be strategy games (like extraterrestrial *Pikmin 3* (2013) or *Europa Universalis IV* (2013), set in a historical context). However, it is precisely in the texts of culture, which reflect their creators’ thoughts and ideas, that one can find a completely new way of thinking, stemming from post- and anticolonialism but constituting a new quality. In this paper, I will show what strategies for showing the Sámi culture were adopted by the creators of the game *Skábma: Snowfall* and how they are different from the solutions implemented by their predecessors.

## Identifications

*Skábma: Snowfall* is an action-adventure game in TPP released for PC on April 22, 2022. Prior to the release, a demo version was available. The game was created by a small Finnish independent studio, Red Stage Entertainment, based in Tampere (otherwise a vital center for ludological research). *Skábma* is their first production. The music was composed by Mark Malyshev. The story takes place on the northern periphery of Europe, in Sápmi, the land of the Sámi. Judging by the costumes of the characters and the information from the lore, it can be assumed that everything takes place at the end of the 17th century or in the early 18th century. It was a period of intense religious colonization and increasing economic oppression. As a result, indigenous traditions began to disappear and the lifestyle of the inhabitants of the saiga slowly started

to change. The issue of identifying and presenting heritage thus becomes an essential element of the game, and the strategies used by the creators indicate a new ideological approach to the issue of colonialism. Below I will present several such elements and show how the approach of the creators from the Red Stage Entertainment differs from those of their predecessors.

The stereotypical image of the indigenous peoples' costumes, characterized by a low degree of technical development and a close relation with nature, usually includes clothes with a simple cut, earthy, pastel colors and relatively little ornamentation. This is how e.g. the fictional Northuldra tribe based on the Sámi was presented in the Disney animation *Frozen 2*.<sup>2</sup> However, it is enough to look at most folk costumes or recall the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood to notice that this idyllic, Arcadian design differs significantly from the tastes of the people who are supposed to wear these clothes. On the contrary, such a subdued aesthetic is rather characteristic of wealthier peoples or more contemporary ideas about "living in harmony with nature," to evoke the New Age trend or the aristocratic Japanese aesthetic of *wabi*.<sup>3</sup> The traditional Sámi costume, *gákti*, has become an essential element of ethnic identity.<sup>4</sup> It is also widely recognizable thanks to Finnish advertising and tourism entrepreneurship, which even abuses Sámi culture.<sup>5</sup> In the game, however, we cannot find decorative, festive *gákti*; the clothes are much simpler and more practical. In the end, it is difficult to imagine that people living in a harsh environment, engaged in physical work, would dress themselves in their richest clothes on a daily basis. The creators chose older, poorer designs, which are confirmed by the museum collections.<sup>6</sup> However, the color scheme, which is a combination of creamy white and red, is just as expressive as in the more festive variations.

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<sup>2</sup> Anne KALVIG, "Nature and Magic as Representation of 'The Sámi'—Sámi Shamanistic Material in Popular Culture," *Religions* 11 (2020, Iss. 9): 165. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11090453>.

<sup>3</sup> Beata KUBIAK HO-CHI, *Estetyka i sztuka japońska: wybrane zagadnienia*, Biblioteka Fundacji im. Takashimy (Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2009), 65-69.

<sup>4</sup> Magdalena WASILEWSKA-CHMURA, "Contemporary Variations on the Theme of the Epic 'Ædnan' by Linnea Axelsson," *Litteraria Copernicana* 41 (2022, No. 1): 70.

<sup>5</sup> „SÁPMI: No Fake Sámis, Stop the Misuse of Our Culture.” 31 October 2008. <https://web.archive.org/web/20120217221046/http://www.galdu.org/web/index.php?odas=3374&giella1=eng>.

<sup>6</sup> "NFSA.1334". 22 November 2012. <https://www.flickrriver.com/photos/28772513@N07/8208315697/>.

Anyway, the game shows the diversity of costumes both within one group-family of nomads as well as between them: Askovis who comes from another troupe wears white and blue *gákti*. A special case is a French researcher, Jean, who dresses according to the style of his place of origin. It is unlikely that he could keep his clothes unharmed while living for a long time in a wilderness, mostly cut off from the world. However, the use of such a different outfit is also an element of identification of the Other (although very unique one, because unlike the rest of southern Europeans, he is devoid of colonial tendencies; his mission is to stop the expansion and protect the locals and their environment).

Some of the dialogs in the game have voice acting, but it is only available in the northern Sámi language (ISO 639-3: sme). At first glance, this would seem like Said's orientalism.<sup>7</sup> Anyway, this would not be an isolated case: Karen Cook drew attention to linguistic exoticism, especially in the case of Latin,<sup>8</sup> and Jennifer Smith studied the magical characterization of Welsh dialects and languages.<sup>9</sup> However, an incomprehensible language does not necessarily have to give the impression of eeriness. It is enough to recall the anime, which is preferred by Polish-speaking audiences in the form that comprises subtitles rather than dubbing. The use of a language other than Japanese is downright undesirable; it evokes the impression of discord and disturbance of the genre's aesthetic convention. A similar, immersive effect of foreign languages is used in video games. *Jotun* (Thunder Lotus Games, 2015) uses the Icelandic language, which is very similar to Old Norse, so that the player can more deeply immerse in the atmosphere of the mythical Valhalla; and *When Rivers Were Trails* (Indian Land Tenure Foundation, 2019) uses native American languages to increase the cultural awareness of the audience.<sup>10</sup> In the case of *Skábma*, using one of the Sámi languages does not cause a feeling of alienation, especially since subtitles in other languages are always available. On the contrary, its so-

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<sup>7</sup> Edward W. SAID, *Orientalism*, Biblioteka Myśli Współczesnej (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1991), 416–18.

<sup>8</sup> Karen M. COOK, "Medievalism and Emotions in Video Game Music," *Postmedieval* 10 (2019, No. 4): 492–93. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41280-019-00141-z>.

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer SMITH, "Welsh Celticism and the Magical Soundscape". Paper presented at the Ludo2022 Eleventh Annual Conference on Video Game Music and Sound, Royal Holloway University of London, Egham, GB, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth LAPENSÉE, "When Rivers Were Trails: Cultural Expression in an Indigenous Video Game," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27 (2021, No. 3): 2–3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1746919>.

norities harmonizes perfectly with the landscape of the Scandinavian taiga, deepening and making the worldbuilding narrative more feasible. It can be said that it anchors the player in reality in the midst of supernatural events.

The event that initiates the plot of the game is the disappearance of a reindeer. Due to his inattention, Áilu does not close the gate of the corral, which results in the reindeer deciding to leave it at night. The boy is threatened with expulsion from the community for his negligence and sets off in pursuit of the fugitive. Unfortunately, he fails to save the animal as a powerful explosion causes the earth to collapse and the reindeer to die. They end up in the cave, where Áilu finds a mysterious drum; he also discovers that a fragment has broken off from the animal's antlers, which can be used to play that instrument. This motif will be discussed later; let me only draw attention to the narrative frame, which is returning the broken fragment of the antlers to the reindeer at the end of the game. The skeleton of the animal must be complete so that its spirit should not be imprisoned. Releasing the power of the Celestial Reindeer is also an axis or a turning point, allowing the hero to overcome adversity and save at least some loved ones. Reindeer herding by the Sámi grew out of hunting the animals in the first millennium AD and gained popularity in the 13th century.<sup>11</sup> Still, these tribes led a fishing-hunting lifestyle. It was not until the 17th century that reindeer herding became the primary occupation and source of living, remaining the most visible element of Sámi culture to this day. This was a result of economic transformations, such as increasing taxes imposed by the new southern rulers, the exploitation of forest resources and the development of mining as well as the ever-increasing nutritional needs due to population growth.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine that every reindeer was worth its weight in gold in the harsh conditions of the frosty north; consequently, these animals became a worldwide-recognizable symbol of the Sámi. Let us recall the popular Christmas mythology (disseminated especially in the Anglo-Saxon circle associated with Santa Claus and the North Pole, located in the north of Finland) and both Disney's *Frozen* films to realize that reindeer almost automatically evokes the frosty but also beautiful atmosphere

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<sup>11</sup> Lydia HEIKKILÄ, "Reindeer Talk: Sámi Reindeer Herding and Nature Management," *Acta Universitatis Lapponiensis* (Rovaniemi: University of Lapland, 2006), 94–95.

<sup>12</sup> HEIKKILÄ, "Reindeer Talk," 95, Erich KASTEN, "Sāmi Shamanism from a Diachronic Point of View," in *Shamanism: Past and Present* (Budapest/Los Angeles: Istor, 1989), 118.

of the rugged taiga.<sup>13</sup> *Skábma* allows players to caress the reindeer with Áilu's hands, which enables them to build a bond with those animals in the game world. However, while there are usually no major problems with reindeer in culture (apart from excessive cultural appropriation), other fauna representatives are treated more carelessly. Although there are examples of preserving the meanings that are inherent in Sámi culture, e.g. in *Ofelaš*, the 1987 Sámi film, more frequently one can come across a completely free treatment of this subject. In *Frozen 2*, a salamander (mainly associated with this element in ancient and medieval southern Europe) played the role of the spirit of the fire element, while *Skábma* casts a fox as the appropriate guardian spirit, thus following the Sámi tales of the "fiery foxes".<sup>14</sup>

The last widely recognizable element is the joik. It is a kind of improvised song performed in the technique of throat singing. Despite strenuous attempts to eliminate all its manifestations, especially from Laestadianism (a local branch of Protestantism), joik has survived and is still practiced both in its traditional form and in fusion with other genres, most often as pop and jazz.<sup>15</sup> This unique, distinctive singing has become a widely recognizable code identifying either the Sámi (*Ofelaš*, *Frozen 2*) or the generally frosty north (*Frozen*).<sup>16</sup> Amazingly, despite such a significant meaning, one cannot hear joik at all while playing *Skábma*. It only appears with the optional rest of Áilu at bonfires lit in some places. Given the ease of using known conventions, this secrecy of joik seems to be a conscious procedure. The creators refer to the Sámi tradition of joiking, that is, improvising joiks about people, places and events, not necessarily with

<sup>13</sup> Trude FONNELAND, "Religion-Making in the Disney Feature Film, *Frozen II*: Indigenous Religion and Dynamics of Agency," *Religions* 11 (2020, Iss. 9): 177–78. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11090430>; Stein R. MATHISEN, "Souvenirs and the Commodification of Sámi Spirituality in Tourism," *Religions* 11 (2020, Iss. 9): 144. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11090429>.

<sup>14</sup> FONNELAND, "Religion-Making," 178; Tina K. RAMNARINE, "Sonic Images of the Sacred in Sámi Cinema. From Finno-Ugric Rituals to Fanon in an Interpretation of 'Ofelaš'." *Interventions* 15 (2013, No. 2): 246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2013.798474>.

<sup>15</sup> Trude FONNELAND, and Tiina ÁIKÄS, "Introduction: The Making of Sámi Religion in Contemporary Society," *Religions* 11 (2020, Iss 11): 2–3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11110547>; Anna NACHER, and Marek STYCZYŃSKI, *Vággi várrri: w tundrze Samów. Dzikie Pola* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Alter, 2013), 50.

<sup>16</sup> FONNELAND, "Religion-Making," 177; Tina K. RAMNARINE, "Sonic Images of the Sacred in Sámi Cinema. From Finno-Ugric Rituals to Fanon in an Interpretation of 'Ofelaš'." *Interventions* 15 (2013, No. 2): 239–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2013.798474>; Tina K. RAMNARINE, "Frozen through Nordic Frames." *Puls: Swedish Journal of Ethnomusicology and Ethnochoreology* 1 (2016): 14–19.

words.<sup>17</sup> The song becomes an intimate moment of rest and recapitulation, admiration for nature or detachment of thoughts from troubling problems. They restore the cameral nature of joik and its close connection with life, somewhat forgotten in the neoliberal hubbub.

## **The Shaman and His Drum**

The main element of *Skábma* is a Sámi shamanic frame drum of oval shape, *goavddis*. Thanks to his finding, Áilu gains extraordinary abilities, such as seeing ghosts and moving rocks. Interestingly, neither the drum nor the boy himself have any power. When Askovis hits the *goavddis*, nothing happens at all. Despite being the great-great-grandson of the powerful female *noaidi* (shaman), Áilu is just an ordinary boy before using the instrument and after returning it. The legacy of Áilu is extraordinary because the *noaidit* were usually men; women-shamans were much less common, unlike in southern Europe.<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that the matriarchal magic of the Northumbrians from *Frozen 2* fits into a much more mainstream vision of women, stereotypically more associated with nature, magic and spirituality, while *Skábma* is closer to historical realities and does not fall into frequently occurring patriarchal schemes thanks to the character of a strong woman-shaman. Given the scale of persecution of the northern “witchers” in the 17th century, it may not be so easy, though.<sup>19</sup> The bloody persecutions are still remembered by the game characters. The inhabitants of Áilu’s *siida* (the basic social unit of the Sámi, a group of people who lead a nomadic lifestyle together, usually linked by blood, although Áilu was adopted), are reluctant to him bringing the drum. They warn Áilu against revealing his possession to strangers and pass on the intangible heritage of ancient beliefs only on rare occasions and to a small extent.

The style of the drawings decorating the Áilu’s *goavddis* is similar to the original, while the form depicting four caring spirits in the center resembles contemporary instruments.<sup>20</sup> However, due to the extensive collection and

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<sup>17</sup> NACHER and STYCZYŃSKI, *Vággi várri*, 46–68)

<sup>18</sup> Rune Blix HAGEN, “Sámi Shamanism: The Arctic Dimension,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1 (2008, No. 2). <https://doi.org/10.1353/mrw.0.0031>.

<sup>19</sup> HAGEN, “Sámi Shamanism.”

<sup>20</sup> See Tore AHLBÄCK, and Jan BERGMAN, eds., “The Saami Shaman Drum: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on the Saami Shaman Drum Held at Åbo, Finland, on the 19th–20th of August 1988,” *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 14 (Åbo, Finland, Stockholm, Swe-

burning of drums by missionaries, only 71 instruments have survived to this day, so it is difficult to judge on the basis of such a small sample whether they are compatible or incompatible with authentic patterns.<sup>21</sup> The drum in *Skábma* looks probable and idiomatic enough not to disturb the setting, and at the same time, its design is closely related to the plot of the game.

The creators of the game use the beliefs inherent in *goavddis* in an innovative way, placing the ability to perform supernatural activities without falling into common tropes, which are characteristic of other varieties of shamanism but absent from the Sámi. According to legends, *noaidit* were able to use a drum to heal, summon guardian spirits to help, and also make a kind of divination: while drumming the *goavddis*, a small tied bone jumped between the drawings and its movement was then interpreted by a shaman.<sup>22</sup> In *Skábma*, traces and paths are shown when Áilu hits the drum, leading to important places, treasures and finds. The hero recovers lost health points; he sees and can talk to the spirits of trees and people who have left their bodies. The boy can also purify the contaminated earth and, after gaining the favor of the spirits, summon them to specific actions. With the exception of the fox, acquiring guardian spirits is done by purifying their *sieiddit* (sacrificial places) and overcoming trials in spirit dimensions with their help. However, unlike other shamanisms, the Sámi did not go into a trance to reach these worlds. Similarly, Áilu gets there thanks to *sieiddit*, which act as interdimensional portals.<sup>23</sup> *Sieiddit* themselves do not often appear in other works on Sámi themes, perhaps due to their non-visibility and unremarkable “blending” into the environment.<sup>24</sup>

The last element is the issue of rhythm. The ambient accompanying the game is usually very calm, although it is definitely more violent in some locations; the pulse and tempo are always clearly recognizable. While hitting the drum, Áilu seems to hear it in some way as he adjusts the tempo of his strokes to it. Even after an intentional start of stroking across the flow of the background music, the beat quickly synchronizes with it. Particularly intriguing is

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den: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 1991); Francis Joy, “The Importance of the Sun Symbol in the Restoration of Sámi Spiritual Traditions and Healing Practice,” *Religions* 11 (2020, Iss. 6). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11060270>.

<sup>21</sup> Francis Joy, “Sámi Shamanism, Cosmology and Art as Systems of Embedded Knowledge,” *Acta Universitatis Lapponiensis* 367 (Rovaniemi: University of Lapland, 2018), 16.

<sup>22</sup> HAGEN, “Sámi Shamanism”; Joy, “Sámi Shamanism, Cosmology and Art.”

<sup>23</sup> NACHER and STYCZYŃSKI, *Vággi várri*, 155.

<sup>24</sup> NACHER and STYCZYŃSKI, *Vággi várri*, 157–59.



the description of the *sieiddit* contamination by a young *noaidi*, describing the sound coming from them as a flawed, false beating, that is, a disturbance of the rhythm of Nature. This shows the possibility of interpreting ambient as the *musica mundana* (see i.e. Boethian *consonantia elementorum* and *temporum*).<sup>25</sup> Thanks to this, the role of the Sámi shaman becomes clear: he is not a magician or sorcerer, but a herald between the world of people and the world of nature, who takes care of maintaining balance and harmony between them.<sup>26</sup>

## The disenclosure

In his research on Javanese and Balinese music featured in computer games, Alvin Laurentius noticed that older titles occasionally use a gamelan in order to orientalistically evoke an exotic idyll; on the contrary, in newer games (*Civilization V* and *Civilization VI*, Firaxis Games 2010, 2016), a gamelan appears in more adequate circumstances, although it is subordinated to the principles of Western musical art; eventually, the recent productions (*Kena: Bridge of Spirits*, Ember Lab 2021) have the authentic score that is no longer overshadowed by Western “smoothing”. This kind of authenticity seems to be a new, slowly emerging after-postcolonial paradigm in culture. *Skábma* also fits into this trend, which can be seen in the strategies mentioned above. Even the map, a collectible in the game, is not very helpful. Unlike the standard maps in games with marked essential places, this one is completely decolonized, presenting only a poorly readable sketch of the terrain. Interestingly, this revival of authentic indigeneity does not occur exclusively in cultural texts that were created far from metropolises and by previously colonized minorities (after all, *Kena* was made in Los Angeles). I claim that we are witnessing a slow emergence of a new reading of Fanon’s *la décolonisation du monde* (the disenclosure of the world)<sup>27</sup> in the sphere of culture, and *Skábma* is an example of a text that belongs to this trend. The Sámi are in a unique position: multilingual, scattered among several countries and inherently nomadic, Europeans alien to Europe. They have little chance to develop an anti-colonial, nation-constituting

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<sup>25</sup> Marcin KONIK, “Muzyka u Boecjusza i w filozofii średniowiecznej,” *Archiwum Historii Filozofii i Myśli Społecznej* (2006): 61.

<sup>26</sup> JOY, “Sámi Shamanism, Cosmology and Art,” 300.

<sup>27</sup> MBEMBE, “Decolonization, Disenclosure and the Common.”

narrative.<sup>28</sup> Their struggle to preserve their own identity takes on a different, more culture-making form.<sup>29</sup> *Skábma* is anti-nationalist precisely because of its uncompromising authenticity in depicting the heritage of the Sámi. Almost paradoxically, it removes the artificial boundaries of misunderstanding, hermeneutically explaining a foreign culture, familiarizing with the Other, and immersing the player in the magical world so that he settles in it and understands its rules. This is a beautiful vision of the future, contained in the ideology of contemporary cultural texts: a world without borders, respecting all its citizens and seeing different cultures not as a threat but as wealth.

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<sup>28</sup> Tina K. RAMNARINE, "Sonic Images of the Sacred in Sámi Cinema. From Finno-Ugric Rituals to Fanon in an Interpretation of 'Ofelaš'," *Interventions* 15 (2013, No. 2): 248–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2013.798474>.

<sup>29</sup> WASILEWSKA-CHMURA, "Contemporary Variations."

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### Summary

Rather than older, overly simplified, colonial and harmful representations of indigenous cultures in cultural texts, more recent productions tend to depict these cultures in a more affirmative light, focusing on a somehow deeper understanding of them. These productions often rely on visual and textual references, such as clothing, choreography and language, but traditional music is missing despite consultations and the religions they present are uniformized or even superficial. In this paper, I will analyze the *Skábma: Snowfall* game, which is an exception belonging to the trend of positive folklorism. First, I will show that the Sámi people are considered to be the witchcraft nation in the European tradition, which is Christian and colonial. They are stereotypically demonized and misunderstood. In reality, however, their beliefs focused simply on sustaining a connection with nature. Next, I will present the main occurring paraphernalia: the Sámi drum, *goavddis*, and the magic the main character uses by drumming. Focusing on this element is connected with the Saami tradition. In *Skábma*, Sámi culture is taken very seriously, without deformation coming from assimilating it with more known cultures (especially, the Siberian shamanism). I propose that the game approach to colonial themes shows a new understanding of the disenclosure of the world, bringing fresh ideas to the field.

**Keywords:** video game, music, Sámi, colonialism, culture